

**OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL**

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**CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION**

**URBAN SERVICES DISTRCT SUBCOMMITTEE TOWN HALL MEETING MINUTES**

**Legends Center, 5130 Soutel Drive, Jacksonville**

 **January 30, 2020**

**6:00 p.m.**

**In attendance:** Commissioners Ann-Marie Knight (Chair), Charles Griggs, Frank Denton, Celestine Mills

**Also**: Paige Johnston – Office of General Counsel; Jeff Clements – Council Research Division; Jessica Smith, Crystal Shemwell, Sharonda Davis and Juliette Williams – Legislative Services Division; Steve Cassada and Melanie Wilkes – Council Staff Services

**Meeting Convened**: 6:11 p.m.

Chairwoman Knight convened the meeting and described to the attendees the organization and purposes of the Charter Revision Commission and its three committees. She introduced the work of the Urban Services Committee and invited comment from the public.

Public Comment

Kosterich “Rick” Robinson said the Northside still does not have adequate public services compared other parts of the City, septic tanks have not eliminated and there are too many abandoned and condemned houses

Eunice Barnum conveyed her concerns about the prioritization of septic tank eliminations and is especially concerned that Lincoln Villas is not a top priority. Septic tank elimination was promised as part of consolidation, but too little progress is being made. The city government isn’t doing its job because neighborhood conditions are not improving after all these years. How long does the community have to wait for answers? Street lighting on Soutel Drive is insufficient even with more lights installed. Speeding is problematic; police need to be stationed on the roads to ticket speeders. She asked for a turn signal to be installed at the entrance to the Legends Center. Area residents have continually opposed the Soutel road diet and been ignored by the City which insists on pursing it.

Althea Michael said the youth are our most important resource and those who do well academically and graduate from college don’t want to come back to Jacksonville because there’s little opportunity. The previous speaker, Ms. Barnum, has been a tireless advocate for the Northwest area and former Council Member Mia Jones with the best representative they ever had, the only one who ever listened to their concerns and made a positive difference.

Commissioner Mills said that she had placed a call to the City Traffic Engineer and he will call her back tomorrow to discuss Ms. Barnum’s concerns.

Karen Hamilton expressed concern about zoning issues. She acquired what she thought was a commercial building that she later discovered had been rezoned to residential and therefore is unusable. The cost to apply for rezoning is astronomical and there’s no guarantee that it would succeed. The City does not inform potential property purchasers that the zoning has changed. That’s a major cause of blight – the fact that the zoning was changed and business can’t operate in buildings that lost their commercial zoning grandfather status.

Chairwoman Knight said the subcommittee has been studying these issues for months and is committed to making the best recommendations it can to improve conditions in the Northwest Area. All the Charter Revision Commission can do is make recommendations to the City Council and hope that their case is persuasive and action results. Commissioner Griggs told the audience that their input tonight is consistent with what the subcommittee has been hearing throughout its study process.

Eunice Barnum said that the Neighborhood Bill of Rights requires that neighborhoods be notified when City projects are planned to take place in or adjacent to the neighborhood. She also learned about a 350-foot notification requirement and said the City doesn’t adhere to either requirement. The community has no idea how much money is in the King/Soutel CRA account, which has existed since 2008. The community has tremendous needs that the CRA has yet to address; she has no idea where the money has gone. None of their suggestions are ever respected.

Edward Exsom addressed septic tank issues; property owners who have them think they’re getting a bargain by not having sewer bills, but they’re wrong. Numerous mayors have promised to deal with the problem but nothing has ever changed. There is corruption in City Hall that will be uncovered one day. It’s unreasonable to make citizens have to pay for a lawyer to fight the City and enforce their rights. The City gives millions of dollars to rich developers.

Essey Howard with the Northside Coalition described consolidation as a joke that was enacted to prevent Jacksonville from becoming a majority black city. The City has persistently persecuted the black community and he intends to speak out about it every two weeks at City Council meetings, demanding justice. He urged the attendees to take the fight to City Hall and the State Attorney’s office and demand action.

Commissioner Griggs said that the subcommittee appreciated the public’s input and said that many of the concerns expressed tonight, particularly septic tanks, are the same as the subcommittee has been hearing throughout its study. He said that the committee’s recommendation will need substantial advocacy to be approved in both the Charter Revision Commission and then in the City Council thereafter. Chairwoman Knight said that her intent is that the committee’s recommendations will not be ignored. The committee members are very knowledgeable and committed, but the way forward will be difficult and will require concerted effort by everyone to make headway. Commissioner Denton said the subcommittee will report its findings and recommendation to the full CRC and then, if adopted, to the City Council for action. He noted that 10 years ago when the last CRC met, none of the recommendations were acted upon by the Council. He urged the attendees to speak in favor of the proposals at upcoming public hearings of the CRC and City Council. Commissioner Mills said the CRC members have been meeting for countless hours to come up with the best recommendations possible. They recognize that the time is now for action and how difficult it will be, and the CRC members are committed to trying to make positive change happen.

JoAnn Brooks of the Northside Coalition asked about the timeline for the CRC’s action and the plan for funding. She asked how the community could keep up with the progress of the proposals. Commissioner Denton said all of the work of the commission is a public record and available on the coj.net web site. The subcommittees will be reporting their recommendations to the Charter Revision Commission by February 28th and the CRC must make its report to the City Council by March 28th. Another town hall meeting is envisioned for February 18th at a site yet to be determined.

Eunice Barnum suggested that the CRC needs to be producing television commercials to publicize its meetings and do a better job of getting the word out. Not everyone is computer-savvy and has internet access, so coj.net is not the best mechanism for everyone. Citizens need to know where to go to get the answers to their questions and who to hold accountable. City Council has great power, but is not accountable to the people. She’s tired of paying taxes and not getting any results. It may take throwing some officials out of office to make things change.

JoAnn Brooks asked how to get a copy of the City Charter and how much paper copies cost. The document is available online at coj.net or municode.com. Ms. Knight mentioned the Communiversity citizen training program available through the Neighborhoods Department.

Andrea Elliot of the National Congress of Black Women said that City information is accessible but is not easy to find. She recommended contacting school principals and civics and history teachers as good sources to spread information to students and their families. Teachers could use that information as an opportunity for discussion with their classes.

Commissioner Denton said the subcommittee is very interested in finding individuals and organizations with whom to share the CRC’s recommendations so that action results from all the work that has been done.

**Meeting adjourned:** 7:47 p.m.

Minutes: Jeff Clements, Council Research Division

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Posted 1.31.20 9:00 a.m.